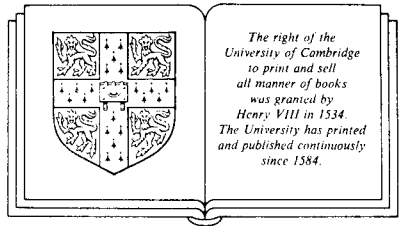


Kaare Strom

# MINORITY GOVERNMENT AND MAJORITY RULE



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# 1. The problem of minority government

When Edward Heath “went to the country” in the winter of 1974, Britain was facing its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. The trade deficit was at a record level, inflation was rampant, and industrial production was declining. Industry was on a three-day workweek as a result of the miners’ strike, and the conflict between the government and the unions seemed likely only to escalate. But when the results of the general election of February 28 became known, Britain plunged even deeper into political and economic depression. The *Financial Times* industrial (stock market) index fell by a record 24 points. The value of the pound dropped sharply in the currency markets. The winter in the oil- and coal-starved country seemed even gloomier. Heath’s Conservative government had just lost its parliamentary majority, but for the first time since 1929 there was no new majority to take its place. Both the Conservatives and Labour were held to less than 40% of the popular vote, and in the House of Commons the Liberals and other minor parties held the balance. The *Times* called it “an election with a result but no government.”

On Saturday, March 2, the prime minister invited Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader, to talks in Downing Street. These conversations, whose purpose was to explore the opportunities for a coalition government, continued the next day. On March 4 Heath wrote Thorpe imploring the Liberals to join his government to give the country a “stable and confident” administration. In declining Heath’s offer, Thorpe expressed his desire for an even broader coalition: a “government of national unity” including the Labour party. Heath duly tendered his resignation, and Harold Wilson promptly formed Britain’s first minority government in 45 years. This outcome, a minority government, was what Heath less than a week before the election

had described as the *worst* possible result (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974).

This book is about the kind of cabinet Heath feared and Britain got: minority governments in parliamentary regimes. British observers of Wilson's experiment generally agreed on two observations about minority governments: (1) They represent significant departures from two-party politics, and (2) they are generally unhealthy and ineffective. The main thesis of this book is that these observers were wrong on both counts. As Wilson's government took to its tasks with vigor and notable successes, some people in Britain came to change their view of minority cabinets (see Butler and Kavanagh, 1975; Finer, 1975), but that is another story.

Minority governments are defined by the relationship between the legislative and the executive branches of government in parliamentary democracies, the most common type of democratic regime. Nothing could be more distinctly political than such intragovernmental relations. Yet, the modern science of politics has hardly belabored minority governments to exhaustion. On the contrary, political science has been strangely silent on this phenomenon. This discrepancy has to do with two important developments in modern political science. One is the behavioral revolution in social science, which directed scholarly interest away from political institutions and toward behavior and its social origins. The second factor is the wave of radical activism that hit the discipline in the late 1960s, shifting attention away from institutions and toward social problems and policies. Certainly these developments resulted from both political and scientific dissatisfactions, and just as surely they have had scholarly as well as political consequences.

If political scientists had moved little beyond formal institutional analysis in the past, they soon came to neglect issues at the very core of democratic politics. Then, in recent years, students of behavior and policy alike have rediscovered the importance of institutions. Students of interest groups and corporatism (Berger, 1981; Schmitter and Lehmbruch, 1979), legislative decisions (Shepsle, 1979), social revolutions (Skocpol, 1979), and democratic stability (Lijphart, 1984a; Powell, 1982a) have rediscovered the importance of governmental and other political institutions. There has been a renaissance in the comparative study of governments and electoral systems (Bog-

danor and Butler, 1983; Grofman and Lijphart, 1985), as well as of party and government coalitions (Bogdanor, 1983; Browne and Dreijmanis, 1982; Laver and Budge, forthcoming; Luebbert, 1986; Pridham, 1986). This growing recognition of the importance of governmental institutions has not meant a return to the formalism of bygone days. The new institutionalists are innovative and diverse (March and Olsen, 1984).

Executive-legislative relations remain at the core of democratic politics in advanced industrial nations, and the study of comparative politics may be on its way back to its institutionalist basics. But we still lack an adequate understanding of the causes and performance of minority governments in parliamentary democracies. It is to this task we now turn.

## Democracy and parliamentary government

In the emergent nation-states of Western Europe, the differentiation between executive and legislative power was an early and critical development. In fact, the protracted struggle between the two has provided the essential constitutional structure of these polities. Through Montesquieu and the Federalists political authority came to be seen as naturally differentiated into legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. This conception is still very much with us today, in theory as well as in actual institutions.

The constitutional relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government is the basis for the distinction between *unified* (or fused) and *separation-of-powers* forms of government. In the contemporary world of democracies the two forms of government roughly correspond to parliamentary and presidential systems, respectively.<sup>1</sup> This book is confined to parliamentary government, which is the predominant form of government among the democracies of Western Europe and the Commonwealth. The distinguishing characteristics of unified parliamentary systems are that the chief exec-

<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary and presidential systems are not exhaustive categories, and hybrid forms exist (Blondel, 1973; Lijphart, 1984a). The Fifth French Republic, in which the prime minister is responsible to the assembly as well as to the president, represents one such mixed case.

utive is elected by, and responsible to, the legislature (Lijphart, 1984a: 68).

The responsibility of the executive branch to the legislature is often ambiguous. It consists in a relationship of accountability, in which the government (executive) must resign if it no longer enjoys the confidence of the legislative assembly. A defeat on a confidence motion or an "important" bill is typically enough to send the government packing. However, in such polities as the German Federal Republic, Spain, and Switzerland the power of the legislature to retire the cabinet is seriously circumscribed (Laver and Schofield, in press).

But what part of the executive branch is responsible to what part of the legislature? Conventionally, parliamentary responsibility concerns only politically appointed members of government and not career civil servants. And the sanction these incumbents face is the loss of office.<sup>2</sup> A further qualification of the parliamentary principle is that the confidence relation applies only to popularly elected chambers. Parliamentary democracy does not imply cabinet responsibility to unelected chambers, such as the British House of Lords. Nor is the cabinet normally responsible to *indirectly* elected chambers in bicameral systems, such as the French Senate or German Bundesrat. Only in the relatively rare cases of coequal chambers with similar electoral laws (e.g., Italy) can the cabinet be responsible to both chambers of the legislature.<sup>3</sup> The decision rule for the confidence relation between government and legislature is normally simple majority. The counting of abstentions, however, is often ambiguous, and some modern constitutions have decision rules that protect the status quo through such mechanisms as the German *constructive vote of no confidence*.

## Majority and minority governments

The application of the majority principle to parliamentary responsibility is not altogether straightforward. In parliamentary regimes, cabinets must at various junctures produce legislative majorities in

<sup>2</sup> We are not concerned here with such constitutional sanctions as impeachment.

<sup>3</sup> The confidence relation between the government and the upper chamber of the legislature may still be a controversial issue. Consider, for example, the Australian constitutional crisis of 1976 (Lijphart, 1984a: 95–105).

order to perform their constitutional functions. In general there are two critical tests of government majorities: (1) confidence motions, and (2) final votes on bills supported by the government.

Parliamentary governments must be able to win votes of confidence. Such votes generally come in three forms, according to their origins. Votes of confidence may be demanded by the government itself or by the opposition, or they may be required by the constitution. Governments are normally free to press confidence motions at any time, although they may not be permitted to dissolve the legislature in the event of a loss. The opposition may be more restricted in its access to confidence motions, as in the Spanish constitution. Constitutionally mandated confidence votes are particularly likely at the time when a new government first presents itself to the legislature. Many constitutions, especially modern and republican ones, require a *vote of investiture* at this juncture (Laver and Schofield, 1989). Let us call the necessity of winning votes of confidence a *viability* requirement, since a defeat on such a vote typically ends the government's "life."

But viability is no guarantee that a government can fulfill its constitutional functions. Parliamentary governments also face the requirement of *effectiveness*. Over anything but the very short run, they must regularly be able to muster legislative majorities for their legislative and budgetary bills, their appointments, etc. Parliamentary governments, then, must be both viable and effective. In studies of coalitions in parliamentary government it is commonly assumed (1) that the legislative coalitions that provide a government's viability and effectiveness are identical, and (2) that these majorities consist of the political parties from which the members of the government are drawn. In coalition-theoretic parlance, the assumptions are that the coalitions over policy and office are identical and that they can be identified as the parties holding cabinet portfolios.

Neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. Parties without cabinet portfolios may well support the government on confidence votes, legislative bills, or both. It is particularly common for parties not in the portfolio coalition to participate in the legislative coalition all or part of the time. Parties not represented in the cabinet may even receive some office payoffs, for example in the form of sub-cabinet offices, legislative chairmanships, or other appointments in

the public sector. However, parties in the portfolio coalition are likely to be members of the legislative coalition almost all the time. Members of governing parties are particularly unlikely to get away with frequent departures from the fold on votes of confidence.

Thus, coalitions over policy may well be larger than coalitions over portfolios, and viability coalitions may differ from effectiveness coalitions. These simple points go right to the heart of the problem of minority governments. In short, they problematize the expectation of *majority government*. Let us define a majority cabinet (or government) as

any cabinet that meets all appropriate constitutional requirements and that is composed of persons acting as representatives of political parties or parliamentary groups that collectively control no less than one half of all seats in the national legislature, or that chamber of the legislature to which the cabinet is constitutionally responsible.<sup>4</sup>

By implication, this definition admits the possibility of cabinets without legislative majorities.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is precisely such aberrations that interest us. Minority cabinets (or governments) are cabinets that meet all of the foregoing requirements except the majority clause. However, majority and minority governments do not jointly exhaust

<sup>4</sup> The technical distinction between the less inclusive term "cabinet" and the more inclusive term "government" is of little relevance to my concerns here. Unless otherwise specified, I henceforth use both synonymously for that part of the executive branch that is responsible to parliament in parliamentary systems.

<sup>5</sup> Note that I define the majority so as to include the tie vote. The rationale is that most parliaments have rules favoring the status quo in the event of tie votes. In parliamentary regimes this generally means the party or parties in office. Even in the absence of such a bias, the worst predictable outcome for the government would be a stalemate. But under no existing institutional rule would this suffice to bring down the incumbent government. And the crucial property of a minority government is precisely that the composition of parliament appears sufficient to bring down the government at any time. The point is less academic than it may seem. The parties represented in Scelba's Italian government (1954–5) accounted for exactly 295 of 590 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In Ireland, the third Lemass government (1965–6) likewise controlled exactly half the seats in the Dáil. Moreover, both Sweden and Iceland experienced even splits between their major political blocs during the 1970s. In the course of this decade both Norway and Sweden changed the memberships of their respective parliaments from an even to an odd number purely to avoid such an outcome.

the set of possible cabinet solutions. A further possibility is a non-partisan solution, such as a caretaker or business administration.

One might believe this third category to be indistinct, since we know empirically that many minority and some majority cabinets are precisely caretakers. But the distinguishing characteristic here is non-partisanship and not the caretaker role. If the cabinet members represent parliamentary parties, then we can count the legislative seats controlled by these parties collectively, the government's *parliamentary basis*. This parliamentary basis must logically be either a majority or a minority. On the other hand, if the cabinet members do not act as party representatives (even though they may hold party memberships), then the numerical criterion is inapplicable. We then have a distinct class of cabinets, which I call *nonpartisan*.

The difference between majority and minority governments cross-cuts another important distinction between partisan governments. This is the distinction between *single-party* and *coalition* governments.<sup>6</sup> It is commonly assumed that single-party and coalition governments form under distinct conditions: single-party governments in *majority situations* (i.e., when one party alone controls a majority of the legislators), and coalition governments in *minority situations*, when no party is so advantaged. Political scientists have generally shown much greater interest in coalition governments than in either single-party majority or minority governments.

Both minority and nonpartisan governments deviate from the norms of parliamentary democracy. Nonpartisan governments violate the most fundamental norm, that of party government (Duverger, 1954; Rose, 1974b; Sartori, 1976). However, nonpartisan governments are quite rare, and hence of limited practical interest. The low incidence of such governments will be demonstrated in Chapter 3.

Minority governments violate the expectation that executive and legislative coalitions are identical. Even when the distinction between these two coalitions is recognized, it is difficult to see what would cause them to differ. Why would any party agree to support the government legislatively if it gets no portfolios in exchange? From a

<sup>6</sup> Technically, we could refer to single-party governments as coalitions consisting of a single party. However, this usage is unconventional in the literature on party systems and parliamentary government and could easily confuse many readers. I shall therefore refer to governments as coalitions only when they consist of two or more parties.

different perspective, the puzzle is why the opposition, by definition a majority coalition in parliament, does not depose the government and take the spoils of office for itself. These puzzles indicate that minority government is a *counterintuitive* phenomenon in the world of parliamentary democracy. The difficulty of explaining minority government formation presents itself most clearly in the game-theoretic tradition, where the expectation of majority government is conventionally treated as an axiom. Any occurrence of minority governments therefore seems to threaten the entire edifice of deductive coalition theory. Given the counterintuitive nature of minority governments, the question is whether they can be as easily dismissed as nonpartisan administrations.

### Minority governments: the record

The answer to the preceding question is an emphatic no. Minority governments are nowhere near as rare as nonpartisan administrations. In fact, existing studies suggest that undersized (minority) cabinets are a surprisingly common occurrence across a number of parliamentary democracies. In a study of 132 governments in 12 parliamentary democracies, Michael Taylor and Michael Laver have found 45, or 34.1%, to be minority governments (1973: 229). Very similar figures have been presented in several other studies. Valentine Herman and John Pope (1973), in an article on minority cabinets, find that this cabinet type accounts for 35.8% of the 207 administrations they studied. Hans Daalder reports an almost identical percentage of 36.5 in his study of 10 smaller European democracies (1971: 288). In a more recent survey, Arend Lijphart reports the proportion as 67 of 218 (30.7%) governments in 20 countries over the period from 1945 to 1980 (1984a: 81). Finally, Gregory Luebbert's (1986) data on 12 parliamentary democracies yield a frequency of 37.2%.

Thus, several independent studies show that in large samples of the world's parliamentary democracies, minority cabinets account for about one-third of all postwar governments. Beyond this basic result the analyses differ, and none can be considered an authoritative account of minority governments. For one thing, the data sets differ in their spatial and temporal parameters. Lijphart's analysis is the most

inclusive in both respects. Second, the experts differ in how they define government composition and change. Finally, these authors have widely different theoretical ambitions. Some are mainly interested in descriptions of party systems and patterns of coalition formation. Others are out to test explicit hypotheses of coalition formation. Most important, only Herman and Pope are primarily interested in the phenomenon of minority governments, and their article is dated and mainly descriptive. In all the other studies, minority cabinets are a topic of decidedly secondary importance.

## The causes of minority government formation

As we have noted, there is no rich literature on minority governments per se. However, a number of studies bear on this issue. The subject has been approached chiefly from the following perspectives:

1. Traditional comparative analysis of governmental institutions;
2. Deductive coalition theory based on game-theoretic assumptions; and
3. The literature on comparative party systems.

Each body of scholarship has its merits as well as its flaws. The traditional institutional literature is rich in historical detail, but much weaker in explanatory rigor. Coalition theory unquestionably provides the most rigorous explanations and predictions of government formation. But the interest of coalition theorists in *minority* governments has until recently been only tangential, and their assumptions often patently implausible. Students of party systems have provided many valuable empirical surveys, but their explanatory efforts have been weaker and often underdeveloped.

The most striking feature of the literature on minority government formation is the considerable bias against such cabinets. The explanations that are advanced typically reflect an assumption that minority governments represent some political accident or defect. It is often difficult to get a clearer interpretation of the arguments, since they tend to be *ad hoc* and impressionistic. In fairness I should point out that these ambiguities often are caused by the fact that the authors'

principal concerns are so far removed from minority governments. Yet some themes recur in explanations of minority cabinet formation. The next few pages review the most widely suggested conditions favoring minority governments.

### *Political crisis and instability*

Some form of political crisis is often taken to be the immediate cause of minority government formation. This is a particularly prevalent explanation in institutionalist scholarship on government formation. Consider, for example, Ernst Friesenhahn's account: "Minority governments, which must seek their majorities from issue to issue, can thus be no more than an emergency measure, and indicate a crisis situation" (1971: 312).<sup>7</sup> Klaus von Beyme concurs in his monumental work on parliamentary government: "According to the basic rules of the parliamentary system, every minority cabinet is an unwanted crisis symptom" (1970: 570).

This association of minority governments with political crisis is hardly ever developed in greater detail. As an explanation it is unsatisfactory on several grounds. Neither the locus nor the magnitude of a crisis sufficient to bring about a minority government is specified. Are such cabinets to be understood as reflections of severe systemic crisis or simply of coalition frictions in otherwise stable party systems? Whereas the former interpretation may reasonably represent Friesenhahn and von Beyme, the latter seems closer to the spirit of party systems theorists Michael Taylor and Valentine Herman:

Minority governments are often "crisis" governments, coming to power when no majority can be found. In a multi-party system with a dominant party, a general election may deprive the dominant party of its absolute majority after a series of one-party majority governments, and the other parties, finding themselves with an unexpected combined majority, may be unable to agree on the formation of a coalition, in which case the dominant party may continue in office for some time. Its position, however, will be

<sup>7</sup> Here as elsewhere I am responsible for translations of quotations from works in languages other than English.

precarious, as it usually will have to rely on the support of a small party to provide a legislative majority. (1971: 31)

The crisis explanation is closely related to a focus on political instability as a precondition or concomitant of minority government formation. According to this view, the less stable the political system, the more common minority governments should be. Again, the type and severity of instability associated with minority governments are commonly left vague. A "strong" interpretation would equate minority governments with severe systemic instability, for example, in the form of civil disorder, riots, and strikes. A weaker interpretation might predict a positive correlation between the level of cabinet instability and the incidence of minority governments.

### *Political culture and heritage*

Scholars of a more historical bent have linked minority governments to historical heritage and political culture. Hans Daalder (1971) holds the relative timing of the introduction of responsible parliamentary government responsible for subsequent patterns of government formation. Historical legacies may also be responsible for present-day cultural patterns that impinge on government formation. Consociational democracy exemplifies such practices. Consociationalism in plural democracies includes reliance on "grand coalitions" (Lijphart, 1977). These coalitions need not always form at the cabinet level, but there should be a tendency toward oversized coalitions and an avoidance of minority governments in consociational democracies (Lijphart, 1984a; Powell, 1982). But although Lijphart identifies conditions under which oversized coalitions form, he is much less sanguine about the possibility of explaining undersized governments in similar ways. Minority cabinets, Lijphart admits, may form under a variety of conditions (Lijphart, 1984a: 62).

Whereas these historical approaches point to the importance of long-standing legacies for cabinet formation, other theories put the stress more directly on contemporary political culture. Gregory Luebbert (1984, 1986) linked minority government formation to macro-political regime characteristics. Luebbert classified parliamentary systems on the basis of two variables: (1) the degree of regime le-

gitimacy, and (2) the extent to which the opposition parties engage in consensus-building legislation. Regimes with high legitimacy and consensus building were called *consensual*, those without these features *conflictual*. Luebbert found one empirically significant hybrid form, namely, regimes with high legitimacy but without the institutions and norms necessary for consensus building. He called such regimes *competitive*.<sup>8</sup>

Luebbert reported great and systematic differences in patterns of government formation across his three main regime types. Minority governments are most common in consensual regimes and virtually absent in competitive regimes. Conflictual regimes fall somewhere in between. Luebbert explained these differences in terms of the need and ability of political parties to cooperate in government. In consensual polities minority governments form because parties have no great need for government collaboration (although their ability is present). In conflictual regimes, undersized governments result from the inabilities of the parties to cooperate (although the need is there). Thus Luebbert combined cultural and structural factors with strategic considerations in his explanation of minority government formation (1983, 1984, 1986).

### *Party system fractionalization*

Structural properties of the party system enter several explanations of minority governments. Giovanni Sartori (1976) associates minority cabinets with the type of party system he calls *moderate pluralism*. This type of party system is characterized by a moderate number of parties (three to five "relevant" ones) separated by modest ideological distance:

Vis-à-vis the properties of twopartism, the major distinguishing trait of moderate pluralism is coalition government. This feature follows from the fact that the relevant parties are at least three, that no party generally attains the absolute majority, and that it appears irrational to allow the major or dominant party to govern

<sup>8</sup> The fourth logically possible type, the *unconsolidated* democracy characterized by consensus building without legitimacy, was in Luebbert's opinion of scant empirical importance.

alone when it can be obliged to share its power. Thus minority single party governments do materialize, but they do so either as a result of miscalculated Indian wrestlings, or on the basis of a precise calculus (such as shedding unpopular, if necessary, policies), and otherwise as disguised coalitions and transitional caretaker governments. (Sartori, 1976: 178)

Sartori here suggests several causal factors behind the formation of minority governments, as well as some of the functions such cabinets may have. Note that undersized governments are associated with irrationality and miscalculation. His main message, though, is that it is party system *fractionalization* (or fragmentation) that permits such aberrations. Fractionalization is a function of the number and size of political parties. The more parties, and the more evenly they split the electorate, the greater the degree of fractionalization (see Rae, 1971). It stands to reason that fractionalization could correlate positively with the incidence of minority government formation. The larger the number of parties, the more difficult it may be to build a majority, and the greater the probability of a minority solution. Inversely, the number of undersized cabinets should decline toward zero as we approach a pure two-party system (Budge and Herman, 1978).

Of course, explanations of government formation need not be monocausal. The linkage between fractionalization and minority government formation has occasionally been framed in more complex terms. The most prominent example is found in Lawrence Dodd's coalition-theoretic explanation (Dodd, 1976). According to Dodd, party system fractionalization causes uncertainty for party leaders. The more fractionalized the legislature is, the more difficulty they have in securing reliable information about the commitments and strength of other parties. And the worse informed party leaders are, the more likely they will form cabinets that deviate from minimum winning status (Dodd, 1976: 62-70). Dodd thus provides a micropolitical rationale for the correlation between fractionalization and undersized governments.

But in Dodd's theory fractionalization is only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition for minority government formation. In addition, high levels of cleavage conflict or polarization are required (see

the following section). Moreover, information uncertainty is a function not only of fractionalization but also of party system instability and the interaction of these two factors. Dodd's emphasis on party system instability is akin to arguments surveyed earlier. However, his theory suggests that what matters is incremental, rather than absolute, fractionalization. Minority governments are particularly probable solutions when party systems suddenly become *more* fractionalized. Specifically, the precipitating factor is the occurrence of a minority situation in a country accustomed to majority situations. This contention is not explicated in Dodd's theory, but finds a clearer expression in the article by Taylor and Herman (1971). It is most clearly formulated by G. Bingham Powell:

In short, where the party and electoral system typically produces majorities, the elites tend to rely on direct election outcomes and orient themselves to the forthcoming election, rather than to legislative bargaining for a coalition. Where the electoral system does not usually produce majorities, the parties respond to the need for coalition-building. (1982a: 143)

### *Cleavage conflict and polarization*

Whereas explanations from fractionalization stress the numerical properties of party systems, other accounts emphasize the ideological character of its members and their interaction. The extent of cleavage conflict, extremism, or polarization becomes the principal cause of minority government formation. The more polarized or divided the party system, the greater the likelihood of minority governments.<sup>9</sup>

Sartori is the preeminent analyst of party system polarization, but he fails to develop the implications of this phenomenon for minority cabinet formation. Dodd is much more explicit. Cleavage conflict or polarization (Dodd uses these two terms interchangeably and in agreement with Sartori) adversely affects the *a priori* willingness of

<sup>9</sup> Following Sartori's definition, I use the term "polarization" to refer to the overall ideological distance between the relevant parties (Sartori, 1976: 135). While it is far from obvious how to operationalize this concept, it is clearly distinct from a second prevalent conception of polarization as the extent of party system bipolarity. For a more thorough conceptual analysis, see Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1981).

political parties to negotiate for government participation. And the less willing parties are to bargain, the more likely they will end up with an undersized (minority) government. This is especially likely when polarization coincides with fractionalization and party system instability (Dodd, 1976: 57–68). But extreme polarization may in itself suffice to bring about minority governments: “Under conditions of extremely high polarization, multi-party parliaments will experience minority cabinets as parties will not consider majority coalitions even with the existence of information certainty” (Dodd, 1976: 69).

Dodd’s argument is seconded by Powell: “In some cases the formation of a minority government represents intense legislative conflict. The parties are too deeply divided to agree on a stable coalition capable of positive action, so they accept a minority caretaker” (1982a: 142). Note, however, that Powell’s argument concerns only one class of minority governments. Undersized cabinets, he contends, form in three different kinds of situations, of which polarization is a salient characteristic of one.

### *Proximate conditions*

The final explanation we shall consider focuses on the proximate conditions of government formation. In this review, we have moved from causes associated with the structure and culture of the political system as a whole, through party system properties, to circumstances surrounding the particular cabinet crisis. I refer to these processes as the *proximate conditions* of government formation. According to conventional wisdom, minority governments form only when all other options have been exhausted, or when no other options exist. Minority governments accordingly represent failed interparty negotiations.

Such explanations of minority government formation are most common in deductive coalition theories. This literature generally presumes that rationality in government formation entails majority solutions. A minority outcome is hardly ever considered a possible equilibrium. Minority government formation is commonly explained through reference to constraints, limited choice, failure of negotiation, and lower-order preferences, conditions that are often tied to the negotiation process itself (Dodd, 1976: 46; see also von Beyme,

1985: 326; Sartori, 1976). The focus on proximate causes of minority government formation need not be incompatible with structural explanations, as Dodd demonstrates. Note, however, that Dodd's theory is the only rigorous multicausal explanation of this kind.

### *Summary*

This survey has revealed the inadequacy of existing explanations of minority government formation. Although a variety of explanations have been advanced, there has been little serious effort to move beyond simple ad hoc hypotheses. Explanatory efforts have often been superficial and imprecise. Rarely have they been theoretically ambitious. Few have been systematically tested. Institutionalists have occasionally provided less simplistic accounts, but these have tended to be little more than atheoretical post hoc catalogues of parliamentary situations favoring minority governments.

Despite their apparent diversity, existing explanations of minority government formation have many common elements and few incompatibilities. Minority cabinets, it is conventionally held, form in unstable and conflictual political systems, whose party systems may be highly fractionalized. Such cabinets are suboptimal and unstable solutions, which are resorted to only when all else fails. Although specific causal claims are rarely made, minority governments are commonly associated with social and political malaise. I shall refer to this reconstructed characterization as the *conventional theory* (or view) of minority government formation, although it is clearly a theory only in a very loose sense of the word. Rather, this label serves as an umbrella for a variety of explanations with two common characteristics: (1) a failure to relate minority government formation successfully to rational actions by the political parties involved, and (2) an essentially negative evaluation of such governments.

### Minority governments in office

Students of party coalitions have come to realize that cabinet formation is only part of the story of parliamentary government. This is particularly true of minority governments, since the viability and